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A Churchman's View of the Church's Function

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THE Church stands unqualifiedly for social justice. Of this there can be no doubt. I like the form in which this was affirmed by joint resolution of the General Convention of the Episcopal Church in 1913:

Whereas, The moral and spiritual welfare of the people demands that the highest possible standard of living should everywhere be maintained, and that all conduct of industry should emphasize the search for such higher and more human forms and organization as will genuinely elicit the personal initiative and self-respect of the workman, and give him a definite personal stake in the system of production to which his life is given; and

Whereas, Injustice and disproportionate inequality as well as misunderstanding, prejudice, and mutual distrust as between employer and employee are widespread in our social and industrial life today;

Therefore be it Resolved, the House of Bishops concurring, That we the members of the General Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church do hereby affirm that the Church stands for the ideal of social justice, and that it demands the achievement of a social order in which the social cause of poverty and the gross human waste of the present order shall be eliminated, and in which every worker shall have a just return for that which he produces, a free opportunity for self-development, and a fair share in all the gains of progress. And since such a social order can only be achieved progressively by the effort of men and women who in the spirit of Christ put the common welfare above private gain, the Church calls upon every communicant, clerical and lay, seriously to take part in the study of the complex conditions under which we are called upon to live, and so to act that the present prejudice and injustice may be supplanted by mutual understanding, sympathy and just dealings, and the ideal of thorough-going democracy may be finally realized in our land.

When we come to the application of this principle, however, we find ourselves in many difficulties. To apply justice between man and man is the function of our courts, and they perform that function reasonably well. To apply it between great classes of our population has seemed thus far not to be the function of any machinery created as yet in our government. Attempts have been made to create such machinery, as in the courts of industrial relations in Kansas. In grave industrial crises there has been intervention of the executive arm of the government, as in the issues pertaining to railroads and to the production of coal. Yet the fact remains that the solution has not been found. Many of us had hoped that the Kansas law had solved the problem, and when the labor unions rejected it as a peaceful solution and have submitted only under coercion, we have been intensely disappointed. It is to the interest of labor quite as truly as to that of capital and that of the public that clashes between employer and employed should be prevented.

WHAT THE CHURCH CANNOT DO

What is the function of the Church in this *impasse*? Let us first eliminate certain things that the Church cannot rightly be expected to do.

The Church cannot create machinery for the State.—Urgently desiring that there be created for use between classes the equivalent of the courts in their authoritative adjudication between the rights of individuals, it is the function of the State, and not of the Church, to create such an equivalent. We cannot turn back the pages

of history. If this were the day when the Church was organically united, when its own courts had jurisdiction over moral questions, when the whole population accepted the authority of the Church, and when the State backed up the decisions of Church courts by coercive legislation, the responsibility for creating such machinery might conceivably be placed upon the Church. Academically there is something to be said for such a position. When the Church was united, her moral theology contained the solution of every moral question that could arise. In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries the Church would have grappled with such questions as now perplex us in our industrial relations, and would have worked out the solution as a problem in morals. That solution would have been final in the forum of conscience and enforced through the confessional; and it would have been final in law and enforced through the courts. Thus, if the Church were organically united and her authority was accepted by the whole people, duties could be laid upon her that cannot be under twentieth century conditions and the American constitution.

This is so obvious when stated that it seems scarcely worth recording. And yet we find about us constantly the allegation that the Church is recalcitrant, if, indeed, it be not charged that the Church has failed, because she has not solved the problem. Curiously enough, too, the charge is generally made by the very people who are most emphatic in demanding the complete separation between Church and State. Now if that separation is to be maintained—and all of us are determined that it shall be—the Church must not be blamed for declining to assume any part of the responsibility that she would have assumed, as a matter of course,

six centuries ago. The State, not the Church, must create the machinery for harmonizing the differences between capital, labor and the public.

The Church cannot be made the advocate for one class of people as distinguished from another class.—Here, again, there is constantly the assumption made to the contrary. We are told that the Church is a “bulwark of capitalism.” We are admonished that it must be made the “friend of labor.” As a matter of fact the charge is untrue and the admonition unwise except to the extent that the Church must be the friend—because its true relation should be that of spiritual mother—to everybody.

The one thing that the Church may *not* do is to divide men into classes and to sympathize with the one class rather than with the other. Indeed the Church knows and must know no distinction between her children. Long before democracy was dreamed of in the State, the Church was practising it as a matter of course. In mediæval centuries, when autocracy was at its worst, the peasant's son could become pope, and so occupy a position higher than that of emperor. The Church should know no caste distinctions; and the caste of capitalist or of organized labor is not one whit better than that of feudal lord or of landed aristocracy. Well wrote good Bishop Coxe a half century ago:

Our mother the Church hath never a child
To honour before the rest,
But she singeth the same for mighty kings
And the veriest babe on her breast;
And the Bishop goes down to his narrow
bed
As the ploughman's child is laid,
And alike she blesseth the dark-browed
serf
And the chief in his robe arrayed.

The Church cannot become the propagandist for any social or political

program.—It is difficult for many to see why. On what they deem to be sufficient reasoning, they accept for themselves certain policies or programs which they believe essential for the well-being of the nation—socialism or anti-socialism, the single tax, organized labor, sovietism, prohibition, or any other program, good or bad, wise or unwise. Believing in such a program themselves, they assume that their reasoning should also be that of the Church, and that the Church should be committed to it. On the contrary it is no part of the duty of the Church to sanction particular programs looking even to better social conditions. Her part is to proclaim principles and leave to the State, which, ideally, would mean her own enlightened children functioning in another sphere, the formulation of those principles in a program or policy. So also the Church cannot attempt to suggest how her own children should vote.

WHAT THE CHURCH CAN DO

Having thus eliminated certain things that the Church cannot or ought not to do, let us seek to discover what is the Church's function in relation to industry.

The Church should impress the sense of personal responsibility alike upon employers and upon employees.—Men are created as units and as units they will be judged. They cannot merge their personality into a group nor their personal responsibility into group responsibility. Where the collective "employer" is an almost infinite number of small stockholders it is not easy for any one of them to exercise or even to visualize his responsibility. No doubt that responsibility is limited, in the sight of God, by his opportunity to exercise the small modicum of influence that he has. In such corporations it

may perhaps be said that the corporate conscience will function in the directorate rather than among the stockholders. But the directors certainly, and the stockholders where they have the opportunity, must account as individuals for the manner in which the corporation is administered with relation both to employees and to the public. The fundamental difficulty in applying Christian principles to corporation activities is the impersonal character of the latter. But impersonality cannot be permitted in the realm of social or moral activity. There is not an abuse in all industry for which personal action or personal neglect is not responsible.

This applies quite as truly to the employee as to the employer. The former cannot merge his responsibility into that of his union. Indeed the abuses in the labor union system, which at the present time seem to be dragging the whole body of organized labor down to destruction, would very largely be obviated if it were well known that honorable men in a union would withdraw in a body if the union should be committed by those who manage its affairs to dishonorable or improper actions. As one reads the shameful story of union after union, such as has lately been revealed in New York and in Chicago, he wonders what can be the secret of that false loyalty that prevents honorable men among their membership from denouncing the things that are done in the name of the union, which is equivalent to saying in the name of all and of each of its members individually. The labor union cannot be saved unless honorable men belonging to it make it perfectly clear that they will not stand for dishonorable tactics; that they will themselves withdraw from unions that are dishonorably managed. For one man to adopt this

attitude would mean his martyrdom; for the whole body of honorable men in a union to do so would be the salvation of organized labor. Honorable men of the unions who are acquiescing in dishonorable management are guilty before God and men of the crimes or misdemeanors that the union collectively commits, while they must also assume the chief responsibility for the inevitable downfall of the union system which must ensue if their own culpable irresponsibility becomes general. The Church cannot perform a more wholesome function in the realm of industry than that of making concrete the teaching that individuals, whether as directors of a corporation or as members of a union, must assume responsibility for the actions of the group.

The Church should define moral issues connected with industry.—We sadly need a moral theology brought up to date. The Church has a definite answer to all the moral problems that relate to purely individual activities. It has no definite answer to the problems that grow out of the collective activities of the present day. Fundamental principles are the same, but the application of those principles to industrial problems is frequently not clear. It is true that there is an increasing literature on the subject, but the Church seems not to have learned how to use that literature. Even in the Churches that practice private confession before a priest, I doubt whether the sins of the individual that are committed in the realm of his collective life—in the corporation, in the union, in society generally—are treated intelligently or uniformly by him who pronounces or withholds absolution. And who can confess a sin unless his refined conscience convicts him of it? The real difficulty is that nowhere in organized Christian-

ity, so far as I can discover, is there, in general, a pastoral teaching such as will guide the layman in his corporate responsibilities, nor a standard held up by which he can test his own life. When we view such colossal illustrations of sin *somewhere* as we have in the West Virginia coal field, be the responsibility where it may, and then realize that among both operators and workers there must be no inconsiderable number of Christian men who earnestly long for a guidance that the Church is not giving them, we see what serious results follow this failure of the Church to develop a satisfactory moral theology pertaining to the realm of industry. Even the sermons that we occasionally hear on industrial topics seldom do more than show the amateur thinking of the preacher who, in the absence of authoritative text books, cannot give that helpful guidance which the people would welcome. No Savonarola arises to interpret a "Thus saith the Lord" to the twentieth century, and the questions are too deep and too intricate for a parish priest or local minister to answer from an inner consciousness that has not been schooled in the detail of the problems.

Yes, we urgently need the guidance of the Church in industrial problems. But on the other hand I question the value of the inquiries into concrete occurrences—particular strikes or other disturbances—and the taking of sides, that some of our national religious bodies are doing. If it were the function of the Church to determine which party is right and which wrong in any disturbance, it would become the duty of the Church to create a judicial machinery such as would enable her to fulfill that duty adequately. It would be essential that competent, trained judges should hear each of the parties to the dispute, should weigh very carefully the evidence, and should

then pronounce judgment after the manner of the courts of the land. True, the Church performed similar judicial functions in the middle ages. But those who believe she ought to do so now should reflect that fourteenth century conditions have passed away. The Church is no longer one. She no longer enjoys the allegiance or the confidence of the whole people. She can set up no tribunal which would be accepted by both parties at issue. She cannot subpoena witnesses nor provide for the proper examination and cross examination of those who voluntarily offer their testimony. In short, the Church neither has nor can create the machinery which would permit her to perform a judicial function with respect to specific issues, we will say in West Virginia or in Pittsburgh.

In the absence of such machinery we find that certain of our social service organizations, representing a greater or less portion of the Christian Church, are performing functions of inquiry as to the facts in particular disputes, making their own deductions concerning them, and publishing the result from time to time. Will I seem unappreciative of their good intentions when I say that, in my judgment, these inquiries and conclusions are a chief embarrassment to the Church in performing her social duty adequately?

For see how much is involved. We have already explained why the Church cannot perform a judicial function with respect to such disputes. The inquiry that may be made by various boards, then, becomes altogether inadequate. They do not establish *all* the facts. They gather many facts, indeed, but lacking the opportunity to correlate them properly, because certain of the facts are lacking, their conclusions are inadequate. Neither among employers nor among employees do we find, in fact, great respect for

the conclusions that these ecclesiastical bodies have formulated from time to time; and since these conclusions purport, to some extent, to be the voice of the Church, those who fail to pay the highest respect to them are necessarily placed in a position of antagonism to that very spiritual organism whose real guidance they would profoundly welcome. I wish I could think that the cause of justice is forwarded by these special inquiries. I do not. I believe, rather, that the influence which the Church might have by laying stress upon principles of conduct is weakened, if not wholly lost, when her official bodies assume to themselves the function of grand juries or of judges.

On the other hand I believe that such inquiries are useful when they proceed from disinterested secular sources. The Russell Sage Foundation, and similar institutions, have an opportunity in connection with industrial disturbances that does not conflict with fundamental duties. The difference between inquiry by such an institution and that by an official body of the Church is that the former has no claim on the allegiance of parties to the dispute; the latter has. The former can make suggestions, can even err, and not commit others than their own few members to those suggestions or those errors; the latter cannot. It is much less serious for a voluntarily formed foundation to intervene in industrial disputes and, possibly, to err in its conclusions or in its advice, than for the Church to do the same thing. For after all, the Church is you and me, the employer and the employed, not as individuals, but as knit into the mystical Body of Christ our Lord. If He, our Head and our Source of spiritual life, had desired that each local branch or board or commission representing some small part of the Christian Church

should have a supernatural illumination in dealing with such matters, in measure beyond what may be possessed by secular foundations, He would have made the possession of that faculty perfectly clear to the world, and the findings of such ecclesiastical bodies would, long before this, have solved the problems of industry. In fact, however, one's Christian humility need not be developed to an extraordinary degree in order that he may perceive that, on the whole, the published results of various inquiries by ecclesiastical bodies have not been marked by greater wisdom, nor have they approached greater inerrancy, than the inquiries of wholly secular tribunals.

The Church should be absolutely non-partisan as between disputants.—Here is the *crux* of the difficulty. In the world we have the unhappy condition that when an industrial disturbance occurs, one part of mankind immediately gives his sympathy to the employers and another part to the employees, though neither is in a position to base his sympathy on an intelligent knowledge of the rights and wrongs of the case. This is tolerable, though illogical, in an individual; it is intolerable for the Church. Neither employers nor employed have, as a class, so universally good a record as to entitle them to the presumption of innocence when a clash occurs. The fallacy of catch-questions that are often asked, as though the answers to them were the chief factors in determining disputes, is past belief. Of course labor has the right to organize; so has capital. Of course collective bargaining is a legitimate right, and it makes it quite as wrong for the one party as for the other to deliver an ultimatum which it will

neither discuss nor arbitrate. Of course arbitration is the sensible method by which to determine questions at issue, and sometimes it is one party and sometimes the other that refuses to arbitrate. Of course graft, and blackmail, and insolence, and hypocrisy, and double dealing, and intimidation, and slugging are wrong; and each of them is just as wrong on the one side as on the other. Yet when an industrial clash occurs, these various matters of course do not afford the slightest clue to the right or wrong that is immediately at stake. An individual has no right to give his sympathies to either side unless he has knowledge of the facts in the case, and the Church must not do so. It is better that the Church should not formally or officially take cognizance of the dispute at all, but should encourage employer and striker to kneel reverently before the same altar, while the Church proclaims to each and to both the immutable laws of right and wrong.

So I conclude this essay with three negative and three positive propositions. Together, they are but approaches to a subject whose very vastness appalls the serious student. The industrial issues of today are too new, as well as too complicated, for the Church to have had the opportunity of formulating a definite, unalterable program. We are still in the stage of inquiry, which must always precede conclusion.

It is helpful always for the Church to participate in such inquiry and to encourage her children to study the problems. It is perilous for her to fulminate conclusions otherwise than on the immutable principles of right and wrong.